FORUM
Decolonising Europe: National and Transnational Projects

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Introduction: Decolonisation Matters

Patrícia Ferraz de Matos and Livio Sansone

In 2020, Europe was the setting for several events that sparked off a broad debate on the need for the decolonisation of thought, practices, spaces, monuments and museums. Historically, several European countries have had a direct or indirect relationship with colonialism and its practices, as well as with the authoritarian ways of managing and exercising power (Cahen and Matos 2018; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Matos 2019). The need to reflect on imperial ruins (Stoler 2013) and to decolonise thought today is therefore understandable. This was not always considered urgent, however. Additionally, there was not always an opportunity for it. In the postcolonial period, debates were limited mainly to academia and, more recently, to the world of museums, where the hot issue of repatriation of artefacts and human remains that were pillaged, stolen, or abusively gathered in the Third World was initiated by the 1970 UNESCO Convention against Illicit Export under the Act to implement the Convention (the Cultural Property Implementation Act) and boosted by the successive UNESCO resolutions on repatriation (Sansone 2017; 2019).

Over the last ten years, these debates have also emerged more systematically in non-academic groups or associative movements. Sometimes they have been promoted by Afro-descendant groups or communities, which seek to fight for their rights and for their representation in societies where they are not the majority – or where there is not always space for their voices. However, racism cannot only be related to the colonial past or the past more in general as a large part of the descendants of the victims of colonialism are still victims of racism today (Matos 2013). The concurrence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, with all its power and political relevance (an inheritor of the Civil Rights Movement) along with the global Anti-Trump feeling and, last but not least, the central place of the US in global

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cultural flows (as well as in the global ideoscape of ethnic identities) reached a tipping point at the same time. Indeed, several European countries nearly erupted simultaneously – as part of a chain reaction that reached all continents.

On 25 May 2020, the murder of the African American George Floyd by a white policeman in Minneapolis boosted the BLM movement, which appeared in the US in 2013, after the murder of another African American. In a year of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which several places were subject to mandatory social confinement, this murder brought many people into the streets in highly emotional demonstrations that thus called attention to the problem of structural racism in various societies. In a short time, the movement gained momentum all over the world and the demonstrations supported by the BLM idea spread out over several European cities. Under this motto, it happened that several cities in the same country had demonstrations on the same day. Despite the pandemic and the restrictions, many people went into the streets, seeking to draw attention to the excessive police violence that is often exercised against racialised individuals or more socially fragile communities.

These events aroused others that included tearing down monuments and statues of figures linked to colonialism, slavery and the slave trade and the exploitation of people in general – a new militant attitude brought to the fore about two decades ago by the 'struggle for memory and heritage' in several post-colonial nations in Africa (Lentz 2020) and again, more recently, by the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa (Rassool 2019. Some people defend the maintenance of public space as it is, with added contextualisation or an intervention that allows reflection about former justifications. For many others though, the presence of such statues is simply unbearable.

All these aspects are linked to how Europe's history has been told and reinvented, and the way in which certain persons are made known as winners while others are seen as the defeated. Coloniality, a phenomenon that can survive actual colonialism, is part of a rationale and the geopolitics of knowledge according to which some peoples, languages, continents and histories feel inferior to others, especially to the elites of the countries that colonised them (Quijano 2020). This logic is further supported by the control of knowledge and subjectivity (Mignolo 2007). It is a story that has often brought traumatic memories and a process of restitution, reparation and repatriation is now beginning to be outlined – of inheritances, objects and stories (Azoulay 2019). The aspect of representativeness is also important;

the statues whose presence is under discussion are mostly of white males. The same goes for the names of streets and squares. Although several European countries had colonies, the people who were under colonial administration are not usually considered illustrious or important enough to be remembered in toponymy.

A history that includes the stories of those who have been exploited and marginalised, one that gives them dignity, has been on the agenda for some time (Fanon 1952). They want to be treated as agents of history and not just as passive human beings.

This movement has also brought to the public debate the place of colonialism as regards architectural, historical, cultural and museum heritage. This process of coming to terms with the past has included discussions about the ownership of collections of objects (including human remains) that are in European museums. Such objects were acquired in contexts of exploitation and there is a growing call for their fair return to the communities that created them and discussion of the conditions under which this could take place. This has sparked many discussions; it is sometimes argued that these formerly exploited communities no longer exist or, if they exist, they do not have the material conditions necessary to receive the objects. Or that some collections (which include films and photographs) may be shared digitally and therefore do not need to leave the countries that has collected and stored them.

This Forum proposes to gather contributions that offer suggestions on how to decolonise Europe and proposes examples of efforts in this direction. The aim is to reflect on how the BLM movement, or other similar movements, came to have repercussions around the world, and specifically in Europe. That is, how it came to renew the interest in Europe's decolonisation. We aim to show examples of initiatives, debates and interventions in particular communities or large geographical areas – in northern, central, or southern Europe – in a plural way, including its margins and what goes beyond its geographical boundaries. It is also intended to ascertain whether strategies for the decolonisation of thought are emerging separately (with individual initiatives from each country) or in a concerted manner across several countries. And whether there are European guidelines in this regard.

The Forum additionally proposes ethnography of the process that we have defined as decolonisation of knowledge and its practices. There are a number of specific arenas on which research ought to focus: 1) museums or exhibitions: the ideal site for debates about physical and metaphorical reparation and repatriation (Sarr and Savoy

2018); even in Britain, at long last, the discussion is quite strong, according to the success of the recent book *The Brutish Museums* (Hicks 2020); 2) statues, monuments, and street names are all involved in the process of undoing the cartography of the colonial past in the European urban space; 3) school textbooks – these have traditionally been the vehicle for the creation or acceptance of a (neo)colonial vernacular in schools and, often, also at home; 4) information technology and new social media: how (old and new) processes of colonisation and emancipation from colonialism are circulating on the web and other media; 5) networks, flows and travel: Europe has become more porous than ever in terms of ethnic otherness and blackness, which makes the direct and not-to-be-questioned association of whiteness with being European more awkward than before. Moreover, the presence and voice of intellectuals originating wholly or in part from the former colonies on European soil have created national, pan-European and transcontinental networks.

This Forum deals, albeit briefly, with a set of ethical and methodological challenges. Discussions about colonial traumas, such as those involving wars and massacres, have increased in recent times. It has also been pointed out, as Elisabetta Campagni demonstrates in her contribution from Italy, that 'schools' curricula rarely mentioned colonial history' and reproduce the propaganda of 'good colonisers'. It is in this context that the need to develop counter-narratives has arisen, sometimes resorting to oral history and visual resources, which find a comparative parallel to the BLM movement.

Some narratives from the past about the goodness and benefits of colonisation continue to be reproduced in the present, through exhibitions (or exhibition constructions), as in the Zürich Zoo, highlighted in the contribution by Samantha Sithole, Marianna Fernandes, Olivier Hymas, Kavita Sharma and Gretchen Walters. As the authors explain, under the guise of the role of conservation of natural habitats, the zoo is perpetuating the idea that indigenous communities are 'regressive, uncivilized and unable to protect their environment without Western interventions'. The authors also propose a set of recommendations for European museums to decolonise their institutions and theirs exhibits to also include non-Western perspectives.

Another aspect that has been an obstacle to the decolonisation of thought and practices has been white nationalism, for example the one spread through Serbia's transnational propaganda, a theme that is addressed by Jordan Kiper. Kiper departs from post-conflict regions of the Yugoslav Wars to conclude about the need for education on

social differences and respect for democracy to achieve social peace, and also to be aware of racist extremist movements that are taking place in Europe and the rest of the world.

The idea of colonisation or subjugation does not just refer only to far-flung in Europe or the Western world in general (Europe, the US, Canada and Australia) and it can be applied to what Luca Lai and Sharon Watson call 'internal colonization' to illustrate the case of Sardinia about Italy. This situation occurs when a country treats some regions that are part of it differently over a long period. This can be manifested in political dependence and access to educational or health resources, for example. At the same time, an attempt is made to impose order, a history, a language and culture, different from those that existed in the past in these same places. In the case of Sardinia, the authors highlight some of the militant initiatives that have sought to oppose the imposition from outside.

Finally, Axel Mudahemuka Gossiaux explores the relationship between colonialism and racism and brings us a case from Belgium that proposes the decolonisation of culture, and specifically the arts, based on information technology and new social media. The author considers that one way to prevent Eurocentrism from being reproduced in schools' programmes is to resort to anti-racist organisations, Afro-descendant activist movements, and the dissemination of music on the radio, empowering and highlighting artists from racialised communities.

There is still much to be done and this year of 2021, which hit us with the health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, has increased social inequalities. However, 2021 has also been fruitful in terms of social movements, through an increasing engagement of racialised communities, greater visibility of the problems of racism, which has roots in the colonial period, and the difficulty that exists in dealing with the past. These initiatives can contribute to promoting a history of Europe that includes all groups that belong to it and/or with which they have historically been in contact, inclusively and constructively. At least, it would be a step towards alleviating the economic and social problems of the Old World that need to be reborn to continue.

This Forum thus brings a set of contributions in which Europe becomes the object of analysis, in a process in which it is experiencing a sort of settling of accounts with the past and in which Europe seeks to establish new relations with the countries that once were colonies or were in a situation of dependency. The texts presented help to think about the need to decolonise Europe and suggest several proposals

in this direction, both locally and globally, making its reading pivotal and relevant to understand the present.

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